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Foreign Affairs: The Red Sea Bear

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Nasser is sometimes engagingly frank. In August 1955, when he was shopping for Soviet arms, he told me his only organized political support came from the army and "if our officers feel we have no equipment, they will lose faith in the Government." Another time he confessed that he most admired Tito because "he showed me how to get help from both sides without joining either."

Today the implications of these statements conflict. Russia has already started a crash program to replace Egypt's weapons losses but this time there is a price that comes pretty close to "joining" Moscow's "side." To keep his officers inspired with "faith in the Government" Nasser may have to lean further leftward than he wants.

Army Sensitivity

Until recently, although he supported the Soviet diplomatic line, Nasser's Socialism differed from Russia's and he kept popping local Communists into jail. Some years ago he confided: "I have always feared Communist penetration in the army."

Nasser has hitherto tried to avoid going Communist although forced, in his search for

aid and arms, to rely increasingly on Russia. Now, with his Yugoslav idol no longer truly nonaligned and his army screaming for equipment, he has little room for maneuver. Moscow is thus in a position to gain from Arab humiliation perhaps more than it lost in prestige and military equipment.

The mere fact that Nasser is now almost totally dependent on Soviet goodwill is immensely important, for Egypt is the fulcrum of the Middle East, joining Africa and Asia. Its dynamic leader is the only Arabic-speaker with ability to excite the masses. And Egypt's rivals, Algeria and Syria, are going to go down Russia's road anyway.

We can expect the rearmament of Nasser's forces and the socialization of his officers to proceed rapidly because an important deadline looms. On Jan. 9, 1968, six months from today, the British have promised to get out of Aden Crown Colony and hand over the South Arabian hodgepodge of shiekhdoms to local government.

Both Cairo and Moscow have been preparing for this event which, geopolitically, helps explain the drawn-out Yemen war. Nasser has invested blood and treasure in trying to install a puppet regime so that he can

jump from Yemen into Aden and take over the other Red Sea entrance; he already holds Suez.

Because Tito has veered toward the Kremlin line, his example of ideological tight-rope walking no longer exists. And Russia is clearly putting the heat on Nasser. He can keep the position of Number One Arab with his Arab Socialist Union—considered by Moscow a "fraternal" party—only if he introduces drastic "reforms."

The main demand is to fill the Egyptian officer corps with cadres politically suitable to Moscow. President Podgorny explained in Cairo that Nasser's recently defeated commander came from the ideologically uninspired middle class. If Moscow furnishes enough new arms to keep Nasser's army happy, it wants the right kind of officers to wield them.

Squeeze Play

Thus the charismatic Egyptian boss is in a terrible squeeze. He has fired many generals who lost their weapons in Sinai, so there is little likelihood their support for him remains enthusiastic. Now, the only way he can get enough gadgets to please the new officer corps is by choosing the latter to suit Soviet prejudices.

Russia has been working in tandem with Egypt on Yemen, furnishing technicians and sending large quantities of arms to Egyptian and puppet troops fighting the guerrillas. This whole operation, however, was seriously set back when Nasser withdrew a chunk of his garrison after the June Sinai disaster.

Political Fronts

Both Cairo and Moscow sponsored political movements in Yemen's southern neighbor, Aden: The Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (F.L.O.S.Y.) and the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.). These functioned as co-belligerents against the British but it has suddenly become plain that while F.L.O.S.Y. remains pro-Egyptian, N.L.F. is now inspired by Moscow alone.

So there again one detects a price that Nasser must pay his Russian friends. He still plays first fiddle for Egypt, the radical Arabs, Yemen, Aden and the Red Sea, but the orchestra has a Russian conductor. A. E. Housman wrote:

"The grizzly bear is huge and wild;
He has devoured the infant child.
The infant child is not aware
It has been eaten by the bear."